

IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE**MAPPING TRAVEL ROUTES**

5

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to information
10 processing systems and more particularly to a methodology
and implementation for determining a preferred travel route
for vehicles.

15 **BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

Computerized mapping systems are being developed in order to
assist motorists in determining preferred routes in
traveling between two or more locations. Examples of
20 computerized mapping systems include: Map Quest™, Yahoo!
Maps™, SMART pages™, AutoPilot™, and Rand McNally™. In
addition to the above examples, Mercedes Benz and BMW have
incorporated similar computerized mapping systems into their
automobiles' on-board computer systems.

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In general, computerized mapping systems function as
follows. The operator enters a starting point and a
destination. The computerized mapping system may access a
map database containing road information. Each road in the
30 database may be broken up into segments. The segments may
begin and end at intersections, speed zones, or a change in

the number of lanes. The information of a road segment in the map database may include: the length of the segment, speed limit, and which road segments connect to the endpoints of the segment. The mapping system may plot out a

5 number of probable routes comprised of road segments connecting the starting point and the destination. An estimated travel time for each route may be calculated by summing the quotient of the distance traveled in a particular speed zone by the speed limit of the zone. A
10 route may then be selected based on the shortest estimated time required to travel the route. The travel route may then be communicated to the operator.

If, however, an operator strays off-course from the
15 designated selected route of travel, there is no way for the operator to become aware and make necessary course adjustments. Further, existing systems are frequently not up to date with regard to traffic delays which may be encountered while traveling the selected route. Further,
20 this shortcoming results in mapping programs which provide incorrect information since traffic delays are not programmed into a calculation of the travel time to arrive at a designated destination. Instead, many current systems use the posted speed limit for travel segments in
25 calculating travel time and traffic delays are not considered.

Thus there is a need for an improved methodology and implementing mapping system which provides more accurate
30 information to a user regarding expected travel time, routing and on-course conditions of a vehicle in traveling between selected starting points and a destinations.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A method and implementing computer system are provided in
5 which route mapping for vehicles is determined between
starting and destination points designated by an operator.
Selected mapping is determined in accordance with operator
selected travel-related criteria and augmented with traffic-
related information. In one embodiment, after an initial
10 route is set, the route is automatically updated whenever
the vehicle strays from the set course, or whenever there is
a change detected in related traffic conditions, or whenever
subsequent changed travel points are input by the operator.
The travel route and other related messaging may be conveyed
15 to the operator by audio and/or visual means onboard the
vehicle.

The foregoing and other features and advantages of the
invention will become further apparent from the following
20 detailed description of the presently preferred embodiments,
read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings. The
detailed description and drawings are merely illustrative of
the invention rather than limiting, the scope of the
invention being defined by the appended claims and
25 equivalents thereof.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

30 A better understanding of the present invention can be
obtained when the following detailed description of a

preferred embodiment is considered in conjunction with the following drawings, in which:

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of one embodiment of a system for mapping an optimal travel route, in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a flow chart of one embodiment of a method for receiving update information relevant to the travel route;

FIG. 3 is a table showing one embodiment of several exemplary fields included in an update road segment information packet;

FIG. 4 is a flow chart of an exemplary routine for determining a preferred mapping route in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary output method in providing routing information to an operator; and

Figure 6 is a flow chart illustrating an exemplary methodology for receiving operator input to the mapping system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The various methods discussed herein may be implemented within a typical computer system which includes processing means, memory, updateable storage, input means and display means. Since the individual components of a computer system

which may be used to implement the computer functions used in practicing the present invention are generally known in the art and composed of electronic components and circuits which are also generally known to those skilled in the art, circuit details beyond those shown are not specified to any greater extent than that considered necessary as illustrated, for the understanding and appreciation of the underlying concepts of the present invention and in order not to obfuscate or distract from the teachings of the present invention.

One embodiment of a system for mapping an optimal travel route is illustrated in FIG. 1. As shown, the mapping system 101 is arranged on-board a vehicle being routed and includes computer hardware and software designed to receive a starting point and a destination, receive temporal or current traffic information, store traffic information in a map database, determine an optimal travel route, and communicate the optimal route to the operator. In Figure 1, an operator uses a keyboard or other input device 105 to enter a starting point and a destination into the computer processor 106 which is running a mapping program 107. The input device 105 may also include a touch-screen display or voice input to a voice processing system (not shown). A display device 103 is also arranged to receive and selectively display mapping information developed by the mapping program 107. In the illustrated example, a global positioning system (GPS) 108 is arranged to receive satellite-based current vehicle position information from a GPS satellite through an antenna 110, and process that information to the mapping program 107. The GPS information may be stored within the GPS system and selectively

retrieved by the mapping program 107. Also shown in Figure 1 example is an RF receiver 109 which is arranged to receive traffic related and other routing information through antenna 111. The traffic information is processed by a map
5 update program 113 and stored in an updateable map database 115 which is accessible by the mapping program 107. The mapping system may also include a CD (not shown) for loading initial mapping program data into the updated map database 115, although that database is continually updated with
10 currently received traffic and other information received by receiver 109.

As shown in Figure 2, the receiver 109 receives updated travel-related information 203 and proceeds to verify the
15 received information 205. This may be accomplished by checking the data received in format and other means such as a "checksum" field as is hereinafter explained. Invalid information is not processed. However, if the received information is determined to be valid 207, the received
20 information is saved to the updated map database 115 which is used by the mapping program 107 in determining, for example, the fastest route between two given points. The continual updating of the map database ensures that the most current information, including traffic flow rate information
25 for the selected route, is contained in the map database and is used in any calculation of expected travel time along a given route. It is noted that all traffic and/or flow rate information received by receiver 109 is stored in the updated map database 115 even if such information does not
30 directly apply to the route currently being traveled. A check is then made 211 to determine if the most recently received packet of traffic information applies to the

current route being traveled. If not, the process returns to await receipt of the next update information packet 203. If the information packet applies to the current route 211, then a flag is set 213 to indicate that such an update has
5 been received, and the process returns to await receipt of the next packet 203. Such an information update may indicate, for example, that a previous point of congestion has cleared and the route may be recalculated to determine a faster routing. The flag will indicate that this update
10 information is available and may be accessed by the mapping program 107 to recalculate the fastest route.

The radio receiver 109 is tuned to a specific frequency at which traffic information is broadcast. The traffic
15 information is in a format usable to the computer. The traffic information, for example, may comprise a plurality of packets of information pertaining to a segment of the route being traveled. In Figure 3, there is shown an exemplary information packet including several exemplary
20 fields of information. In a first field 301, information is contained to identify a particular road segment to which the update information applies. Another field 303 contains the current flow rate of the traffic along the designated road segment. In the illustrated example, three other fields 305,
25 307 and 309 are included to show average flow rates for past time periods, such as for preceding 5, 10 and 15 minute periods. Average flow rates may be used to determine trends in traffic flow conditions. In the next field 311 there is information to indicate when the flow rate and other data
30 contained in the packet expires, and a last field contains a checksum number which is used to verify the validity of the information contained in the packet. The updated information

is used by the route selection or mapping program so long as the expiration date of the temporal map segment data is some time in the future, i.e. has not yet expired. By detecting current traffic flow rates, the selected travel route and/or projected travel time may be updated or recalculated.

Average flow rates may be used for this recalculation. The "check sum" field 313 may be a summation of all the numerical values contained in the information packet. Having received traffic information, the program may analyze the data to determine if the data is a valid traffic information packet. The check for validity may comprise summing all the numerical values in the traffic information packet and comparing the sum with the check sum 313 transmitted with the packet.

As shown in Figure 4, the mapping program 107 continually cycles to check for changed conditions. If any of the monitored conditions have changed 403, then the mapped route will be recalculated based upon the changed information. In the illustrated example, the monitored conditions include: (1) operator input for a new route; (2) changed traffic flow rate conditions for the segment being traveled; and (3) on-course condition as determined by comparing GPS data from GPS system 108 with stored points along the current route map. Other conditions may also be monitored to trigger a recalculation of the fastest route. In the present example, when it has been detected that one or more of the monitored conditions has changed, then the mapping program 107 operates to retrieve the route selection criteria 405 as well as the updated traffic information 407 and the current position of the vehicle 408. All information in the database is updated. When the route is calculated, a check for that

segment determines if temporal data are used. If temporal data are valid, the available speed to use is determined by the time it takes to get from the current location to that segment and a prediction of the available speed when

5 arriving at that segment. For segments close to the current position, current flow information can be used. When the destination is farther away, longer term average flow rates must be used to predict the available speed. For instance, a destination that is five minutes away using three segments
10 may use the current flow rate for the first segment, then [current flow + (current flow - 5 minute average)] for the last segment, and an interpolation between the two for the middle segment. The new route is recalculated 409 based upon the current operator selection criteria, update information
15 and current position of the vehicle, and the output is sent 411 to an output device such as the display 103 or and audio output (not shown). As shown in Figure 5, the output device e.g. 103 is opened 501 and the recalculated route is sent 503 to the output device. The recalculated route may be
20 displayed on the display device 103 and/or announced audibly to the operator of the vehicle. Those skilled in the art will recognize that the route may be communicated to the operator using a variety of other methods including: speech synthesis systems, indicator lamps, and "heads-up" display
25 technology.

As shown in Figure 6, operator input to the mapping program is processed by first receiving data 601 from the input device 105. The data is checked to insure that the data
30 include a start point 603, a destination point 607 and operator preferred route criteria 611. Operator preferred route criteria will include input regarding whether the

operator prefers the fastest route or the route having the shortest distance or possible the most picturesque route regardless of time or distance. If any of that information is missing, the operator is prompted 605, 609, 613 to

5 provide the missing data. After all of the indicated information has been received, it is stored 615 and a flag is set 617 to indicate that there is new operator input information available. The mapping program 107 will detect the new input information and recalculate the route based
10 upon the new operator input.

A preferred embodiment of the present invention includes a mobile route computing system which in turn contains a map database, a GPS system for automatically determining current
15 position, and a radio receiver for receiving updated information. The database of information is kept by the mobile system and is updated in real time by a program which receives information dynamically. The means of update can vary from radio broadcast to direct Internet connection via
20 satellite or cell phone, to removable media such as CDs or programmable memory cards or chips.

While the embodiments of the invention disclosed herein are presently considered to be preferred, various changes and
25 modifications can be made without departing them the spirit and scope of the invention. The scope of the invention is indicated in the appended claims, and all changes that come within the meaning and range of equivalents are intended to be embraced therein.